Rock Raiders

SCEA - EVALUATION

The latest revision of Rock Raiders can be best described as disappointing for both fans of the toy line and gamers alike. Level design is simply too repetitive and even the less experienced gamers will find the imposed time limits artificial and contrived. Fans of the Lego branded toys will have more appreciation for the Lego models used in the title's FMV sequences than those models used in the game due to the distant camera perspective. With such strong brand recognition in the Lego license Lego Media is highly encouraged to reconsider their release date in order to improve upon the title that is currently mediocre at best.

Based upon the rev of *Rock Raiders* submitted by Lego Media dated 10/21/99 the Product Evaluation Group has compiled the following list of concerns.

Technical

Consulting with SCEA's developer support is encouraged. 650-655-8181
- Load times need further optimization. Levels take entirely too long to load. In addition there are long periods of blank screens with the completion of levels.

- **ACTION – Continue to improve the load times through greater code optimisation. Speak directly with SCEA developer support and ensure we are meeting the required standard.**

- The HUD display is cut-off at the edge of the screen. The player can only see half of the collectable items, and the character energy meter is hardly visible at all.   All text and critical game objects should not be cut off on the screen. A safe region, smaller than the actual screen dimensions should be used for all text and important gameplay information.

- **ACTION – Redesign NTSC GUI to include a clear HUD. Submit screen shot(s) to LEGO Media so that approval can be obtained from SCEA prior to implementation.**

Gameplay

The greatest concerns with Rock Raiders are the redundancy of level objectives and the use of the clock in those levels where crystal and Lego Men collection are the primary focus. While it is understood that crystal collection is a central component of the game the manner in which it is presented to the player is not particularly compelling for a number of reasons.

- Due to the imposed time limits the player is afforded little opportunity to explore and is forced into a frantic search for crystals. This provides the player with very little opportunity to improvise or to formulate their own creative plan in which to acquire the crystals. If time is to be utilized as the motivating factor behind the player's action then it is only fair to provide that player with the known location of his or her objectives, otherwise the player is forced to stumble around aimlessly.

After speaking with SCEA it is clear that what they are getting at here is that if time is going to be used as a motivating factor it should be utilised in the form of environmental changes over time that force the player to react before an event occurs. Some examples of this are lava that erodes sections of paths, water that begins to flood and rise over the land or landslides that gradually worsen over time. Another possibility that we discussed was the idea that in certain cases, it could be appropriate to place Rock Raider buildings that act as checkpoints for the player. In all cases it was their wish that missions of this nature are more linear in their design as testing has proved that the children simply become lost and disorientated in the existing missions. They

would also like to see missions that are not time-based. These can have more complex maps, with hidden areas, etc that encourage exploration with the vehicles. I suggest that in all level designs are drafted and sent to us with accompanying text. We can then go over the missions with SCEA prior to them being implemented in the game.

♦ **ACTION – Investigate some of the proposed solutions and give an estimate of the time it will take to redesign the levels and implement any appropriate changes. I would like to see a Pros / Cons document that outlines each of the suggestions, the impact it will have on the schedule and the rest of the product as a whole.**

• The current level design necessitates a trial by error mentality, where the player will lose numerous lives simply attempting to locate the appropriate number of crystals. Once the player has successfully located all crystals the levels become a simple memorized pattern to be performed in a race against the clock.

Some of this relates to what I have written above, but I would add that in general SCEA considered the current levels to be simple placeholders that demonstrate the technology, but in no way reflect final game-play. It is clear that major effort must now go into the final designs of the missions before the title is approved for release. The favored mission level is "Hot Scoop," where the player is involved in problem solving and actually utilises the functions of the vehicles. The approach that should be used is to create a level script first. This should define what the player's objectives are; what the secondary objectives/bonus objectives are; what the general style of gameplay is (e.g. race against time, exploration and discovery, combat); and then go on to define particular puzzles, challenges etc. Each level should have one or more clearly defined crux points. These are the sections of the level that present the player with the most significant challenge. As far as possible these are the points of the level that should stretch the player and require them to develop new skills or really master those they have already acquired. The player should of course be well rewarded after these points. At the end of the day I should be able to point to a section of a level map and ask the designer "what is happening here? What is the purpose of this section?" and he or she should be able to give me a concise and coherent answer. There should be no dead space that is just there for the sake of having more map. Every part of the level should be honed to provide the player with a carefully crafted experience.

♦ **ACTION – Once you have established a concrete feature set of hazards, foe and general game-play mechanics (including vehicle and player features) I would like to see detailed paper-based level design maps that provide an overview of each mission, its objective(s) and its obstacles. This will enable us to have discussions and an evaluation of each level, prior to it being created.**

• The "Silver" and "Gold" mission objectives seem completely artificial and do not necessarily reward the player for being a better or more creative player. Essentially "Silver" and "Gold" awards are simply objects to be located and inundated into the memorized retrieval process, in addition to standard mission objectives.

We should consider parameters beyond time / number of crystals. For example we could include a vehicle usage factor, a damage taken factor and a creatures "herded" factor (see below).

♦ **ACTION – Investigate some of the proposed solutions and give an estimate of the time it will take to redesign the levels and implement any appropriate changes.**

• The further incorporation of "Classic Platform" elements in the crystal collection process is highly recommended. There are many platform elements currently in the game, but they could be expanded upon further. Sections requiring a successive series of well timed jumps, negotiation of moving platforms, and timing sequences in order to avoid steaming vents, could all be utilized to make the title a more enjoyable experience.

We discussed various directions to take in relation to this comment. It is clear from the discussions that SCEA are keen to see much more environmental interaction. Examples of this are "islands" of solidified magma that float back and forth in a lava river, forcing the player to make a timed jump. Landslides that occur at regular intervals, enemies that "patrol" a defined path rather than following the player, pathways that erode once they have been traversed etc.

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• The "Hot Scoop!" level is one of the more compelling levels in the game and more levels should try to incorporate this style of puzzle resolution. The vehicles should be the primary focus of the title, and it should be with their use and their ability to manipulate the environment that puzzles are resolved. Too frequently throughout the title the vehicle is no more then an alternate means in which to travel from point A to point B, or simply another means with which to drill rock.

Generally it is felt that there is not a big enough emphasis on utilising the functions on the vehicles. This should be addressed in the new mission designs. This was the whole idea of having an action game in the first place: to make the player use multiple vehicles to achieve the level objectives. At present there is far too much emphasis on the player on foot.

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• An example of a more compelling level would be one where the player must first use the Rock Loader to herd enemies into natural pens before any drilling or crystal collecting can occur. The player might have to identify areas large enough for the enemies to be herded into, or the enemies may need to be relocated several times in a level before all level objectives can be met.

♦ **ACTION – As above.**

• In previous versions there was an additional camera that brought the player closer to the character. Due to technical restraints the developer has noted that the camera cannot be placed too closely. This is unfortunate because the detail of the models is quite good and the game could greatly benefit from additional camera positions, such as an over the shoulder view. Effort should be made to provide a camera view as close to the character as the technology will allow.

SCEA have suggested that a camera could encircle the player at the start of a new mission, panning back once the player starts to move. This would at least show off the detail of the character at the start and help to differentiate the Player Characters from one another. When new vehicles are discovered, a similar camera pan could be utilised, enabling the player to view the vehicle models (which they praised highly) as soon as the player presses the button to climb into the vehicle the camera would pan back and adopt the standard playing perspective.

♦ **ACTION – Investigate the proposed solution and give an estimate of the time it will take to redesign the levels and implement any appropriate changes.**

- Currently players must wait for the jump mechanic to recharge. It appears that this is intentional to create greater challenge for the player, however it is only frustrating and unnecessary. This title contains some platform elements and it is highly encouraged that more platform elements be incorporated where the focus can be placed on the jumping action rather than the management of the jumping resource.

I know that we have already looked at making the jump distance proportional to the length of time between jumps. Perhaps we can remove the feature altogether once other changes / features have been implemented.

♦ **ACTION – TBD.**

- When utilizing Analog Control quick direction changes of the character can cause unpleasant camera movement resulting in choppy transitions. In most instances the camera does not need to be repositioned this dramatically.

Can we look into camera control code and see if there are any possible solutions to this problem?

♦ **ACTION – Investigate any possible solutions and give an estimate of the time it will take to redesign the levels and implement any appropriate changes.**

- Currently there is very little to distinguish the Lego men from one another in their physical appearance. In the menu screen all Lego Men have distinct helmets. In the game all Lego men lack headgear of any sort. **Characters now have different colored suits, however they all remain "bald".**

Can we look into the possibility of some kind of unique character identifier? E.g. – we could make more of the character portrait of the current player displayed on the GUI (the energy shield indicator) or we could try to increase the definition of the Player Character in game.

♦ **ACTION – Investigate any possible solutions and give an estimate of the time it will take to redesign the characters / GUI and implement any appropriate changes.**

- The appropriate voices should be implemented for the movie cut scenes. Currently the characters only grunt and grumble.

♦ **ACTION – Produce a script and send it to LEGO Media together with all the FMV. We will then have the American V/O recorded and produced exclusively for the SCEA version of Rock Raiders.**